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THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION.*

I.—INTRODUCTORY.

As the nineteenth century draws to a close, its watchword of "Evolution" is proclaimed in new regions. And though the new regions are in one sense old,—for Evolution was a principle of speculation before it became a theorem of Natural History,—yet their conquest or reconquest, as we may choose to regard it, completely transfigures the law which too often we merely identify with "Darwinism." In metaphysic, in the philosophy of religion, even within the realm of zoology itself, the evolutionary idea is being tested and adjusted anew; and it is an aspect of this process which demands our attention to-day.

If we ask ourselves how the principle of Evolution can aid us, and is aiding us, in bringing home to our minds the nature of Religion, the answer is, in general, that just as in other spheres it is Evolution which enables us to grasp the unity of the organic or inorganic world, so it is Evolution by which alone we can genuinely apprehend the unity of human nature and of man's highest consciousness.

And as an instrument for this purpose the idea of evolution operates in two complementary ways. First, it enables us to interpret the lower phases of mind by the higher, and so to replace classification by life-history. Secondly, it enables us to appreciate the conflict of form and substance, which follows from the presence of the mind, as a many-sided whole, within every mould or outline which gives the general name to a distinct period in religious development.

I will explain the two modes of operation.

I. Wherever the study of evolution reveals a connected chain of forms, from low to high, there is a strong tendency

* In this free sketch or impression of Edward Caird's great work on the "Evolution of Religion," on the one hand, I claim no originality, but on the other hand, I have so far employed my own language and illustrations that Mr. Caird must in no way be held responsible for what is said.

to treat the higher form as explained by the lower, in the sense of being reduced to its level in value. But the true evolutionary method, recognizing that evolution implies a something which evolves, lays more stress on the opposite result, and sees in the higher form that which crowns the impulse of which the lowest form was the first crude manifestation,—it explains, therefore, the lower by the higher. Thus, it may be urged, "Trace religion back, and you come to the savage belief in ghosts, which originates out of dreams; this, then,—this hallucination,—is all that religion at bottom amounts to." But if we remember that what we are watching is the growth of a form of human consciousness, we shall think it more important to reverse the argument, and say, "Now that we know what a civilized religion is, we can appreciate the need and impulse which led the savage to grope after its satisfaction in a form which, as the earliest, was necessarily the least adequate." And it is ultimately because of the value imparted to these beginnings of intelligence by our knowledge of its completer stages that the student of to-day ransacks the remnants of a savage past for suggestions of ideas and feelings which in themselves have no light or help for a mature human being. There are, indeed, wonderful anticipations, in early times, of the deepest thought of future ages. And this we can well understand. Just so the child may startle the grown-up listener by words that seem inspired. But even the relics of genuine savagery, though nothing in themselves, become something to us as first stammering statements of the riddle which, comparatively speaking, we have read.

And thus the idea of evolution liberates us from the hopeless task of finding a common attribute in all religions by which the nature of religion might be defined. Such an attribute, plainly, would have to be restricted to that which the lowest religions contain,—for what they have not, is not common to all. Religion would thus have to be defined in accordance with the forms which contain it least adequately. But this would be like seeking for the quality of tree-growth in something common to an acorn and an oak, and therefore

restricting it to that which is to be found no more in the oak than in the acorn. In this review of religion, then, we are dealing not with a row of species, but with the life history of a living being. Its nature is most fully unfolded not at first, but at last. And if we set apart any one of its phases or aspects, and say, "Here is a religion—Buddhism, for example—without a God, which proves that a God is not necessary to Religion," we do so at our peril. It may be that Buddhism marks a long recoil or reaction, for which the conception of a God is none the less a condition because it is an opposite. With the passionate atheism of a recent day this was undoubtedly the case. God meant so much to it, that it could not find Him in what tradition offered. All this vital continuity is sundered and wrenched away if religions are marshalled side by side like specimens in a case, in disregard of the life history of the religious consciousness. Evolution enables us to study their living growth less unappreciatively.

2. It also suggests to us that there may be, and in a sense always must be, a conflict of form and substance, of what man thinks and calls himself, with what he *is*. Thus, no abstract name will at any time express him, and within every "type" or period of religion all the tendencies are present, any of which in another type or period may be uppermost. Hence we are warned not to rely on abstractions, but to note that in antagonistic religious phases analogous impulses will assert themselves. Clearly within the great type known as Christianity there has been a Pagan Christianity of Polytheism, and a Judaic Christianity of Monotheism, and one day there may be a Christian Christianity that believes in a wholly spiritual God. And thus we are led to observe that the great religions of the world interpret our own minds to us. As Plato taught us to see the qualities of our own souls writ large in the features of society, so we may learn the meaning of our own mental conflicts when we see them re-enacted on the vaster stage of religious history. As we first understand the phases of the embryo when we correlate them with the evolution of species which they recapitulate in brief, so we first understand the workings of our own consciousness when

we recognize them as distinct forces and figures in the pageant of world-history.

II.—A SCHEME OF EVOLUTION.

It is convenient to have a simple scheme by which to marshal the facts which are brought to our knowledge, and I propose to describe and explain the truest outline or sketch of this subject that I know.

When we look at our daily experience as a whole, we note within it a contrast of two principal factors,—the world and the self. If we begin to analyze and refine, we become aware of serious difficulty in separating the two; but in common life we have no doubt that the world in which we are and act, and the self which is and acts, are at least distinguishable. And further, it is obvious that in some way and to some degree we recognize a unity between the two factors. We expect that the world will respond to the self, and that the self will prove able to deal with the world. If this was not so, we should recognize ourselves as impotent either to act or to know.

Thus we have always present with us, though not always clear to our reflection, two modes of experience and their unity. First there is the world, the region of things which we see and hear and touch, which is technically called the "object,"—what is put before us; and again the self—our mind and will and affections—which is called the subject as being what *has* property and predicates, just as we speak of the subject of conversation, *i.e.*, what lies underneath and connects together the whole tissue of discourse; and, finally, the connection or unity of these two, whatever it is that we think of as bringing the world and the self to correspond, making the world to answer to the self, and the self to have faith in the world. This may be called Providence, or Reason, or Design, or the Uniformity of Nature, or the Reign of Law, or the order of the Universe, or, in short, God; and the consciousness of this unity is Religion. The World or object; the Self or subject; their unity, or God; these are the two elements and their connection which, whether we know it or not, make up the hinge of life.

Now, in order to see how the facts of religious history may be marshalled under such a scheme, we have to bear in mind the distinction of form and substance,—of what man *knows*, and what he *is*. We all have felt that these elements are powerful with us differently under different influences. Sometimes the world is uppermost with us,—we are then wrapped up in what we see and hear, in the crowd of “objects,” which every-day occupations surround us with; sometimes, again, the self, the “subject,” is most prominent in our mental life—we are full of our aspirations, our will, our sense of right and wrong, what we want and demand, to which the world of objects seems inadequate or hostile; and sometimes we have a glimpse of the unity—in the faith which sees the triumph of a righteous will or an intelligent principle in the surrounding world—which we may call religious conviction or the faith in God as uniting the mind to the world of nature and history. We are aware of these ups and downs even in ourselves from day to day; of these periods when we feel quite differently and think quite differently according to the side of experience which is impressing us most influentially; and persons of differing character and temperament and experience live permanently to a different extent in one or the other attitude. Now in history these phases extend over whole periods of civilization and characterize entire national types; so that roughly and generally we may speak of a certain phase of religious history as “objective,” of another as “subjective,” and of another, still, as “absolute” or “rational” or “spiritual,” when, that is, a true sense of “unity between object and subject” has come to the front.

But this is not all. For, as we insisted above, in every phase from the child to the philosopher, from the savage to the modern European, man is a whole mind, and not merely part of one, nor a mere philosophical notion; he *is* more than he knows. Therefore, even when he knows, or attends to, only the world of objects—first one thing and then another—like the child or the savage, still he *is* a self, and *has* a unity with the world of nature and of his fellow-men. Hence it follows that he gives effect to this unity, that is, to his moral

and spiritual need, in a mode and fashion prescribed by the sort of experience which is uppermost in his mental life, and from which he cannot escape. Thus arises the conflict of form and substance which creates the degrees of imperfection or of perfection in the evolution of religion, and which pushes religion forward from phase to phase as man's experience becomes deeper. We do not find first mere Object, then mere Subject, and then their Unity. That would mean, first, no self, then no world, and then complete religion springing into existence without previous development. But we find human experience with its two sides and their need of reconciliation from the very outset; at first, however, controlled by one of these mental attitudes, and then by another, and only by degrees forced forward into *recognizing* the true connection between them as elements in a whole, or factors in a unity.

It will be easiest to understand if we proceed at once to illustrate.

III.—THE THREE PHASES OF THE RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS.

The three principal attitudes of the human mind in religion are marshalled according to the scheme thus suggested to us, as Objective, Subjective, and Absolute or truly spiritual.

We will look at each for one moment. By objective Religion we mean the attitude of consciousness which is observed where man's whole mind, his sense of a unity between himself and nature and his fellow-men, has to find expression within an intellectual phase which does not distinctly recognize any reality but things, or objects, as we say, outside us, and outside each other. How this can be, we may see any day in the minds of children. The child *is* of course in some degree a self and a mind, but he *is aware* chiefly or solely of the things around him; he lives in an attention which passes from one thing to another and never turns in upon itself. Thus, too, it is said of the savage, with at least general truth, that his consciousness is entirely practical. He sees, feels, and acts. He does not pause upon his thoughts, and estimate the claim of his ideas and his will over against the objects and forces of the natural world.

But yet he *is* a self and a mind, though he does not know it. And being a mind, he must have some centre, some unity, some degrees of importance, to hold his world together. For this purpose it seems to be a chance what object he selects in the world of natural things; only, as a rule, it is not a human being, nor anything connected with mind; rather something strikingly remote from man—a stone, a plant, a river—which for any reason has fettered his attention. The interval between man and God seems at first to take this inverted form, in which some object is deified just because it is remarkable in the world of natural objects, and so alien to man and to mind.

Fetichism.—In a very wide sense, the term Fetichism may be applied to such an attitude,—that is to say, to an attitude of mind in which some one natural object among others is selected for deification. More strictly, perhaps, the name Fetichism may be reserved for what we may call Religion “upside-down,”—that is, for the state of mind in which the savage tries to use the powers of the deified object for his own private interests and purposes, and is not even treating it as representing what he cares for most. Something analogous to this appears, of course, in religion to-day. The prayer of the vulgar mind is now, as always, “*My* will be done.”

Morality.—Has such early objective religion any connection with morality? If we take our own morality as a standard, we shall be apt to say that we can find little or no trace of a moral attitude in the mind as thus described. But if not morality, we shall find a germ of morality. For, as we said, the meaning of the importance attached to the object which is worshipped or deified is that it forms a centre, or implies a world; if not a better and worse, yet a more or less important, reaching over a certain connected range of man and nature. The man has a group of human beings connected with him by some kind of kinship; the object, which is important to him,—perhaps a rock or a river or a species of bear or wolf,—is also important to his group. His own conduct, as it concerns the group, also concerns the powerful object, and as it concerns the object,—winning its favor or the reverse,—also

concerns the group. In serving his god, he serves some man, though reckless of others; in serving some man, he serves his god. Thus we find the unity or connection between the man's self and surrounding nature and his fellow-men, forced into the accidental shape which his intellectual level prescribes. He worships stocks and stones, plants and animals: natural objects, invested with sacredness by the chance which makes them the link between the man and his surroundings, which he has not the capacity to apprehend in any other form. If we will have a common quality to be the nature of religion, this function of a link or centre of unity in man's life comes nearest it.

Ancestor-Worship.—Thus there suggests itself an interesting explanation for ancestor-worship, if we observe the fact that the ancestor worshipped as divine is in primitive religion very seldom a deified human being. If we say, with Herbert Spencer, that the object of worship really came from an actual ancestor who has been deified, we have to explain how in tradition he has turned into a lifeless object or an animal; and this leads us into obsolete theories of names with forgotten meanings; he was called fox for his cunning, so we should have to reason, and is worshipped as fox, tradition having forgotten that he was man. This is theory of an obsolete kind. The savage inference is simple. "This rock or river or animal protects me and my group; therefore it has connection with us; therefore we are its descendants." Blood-relationship was the natural because external form of connection which suggested itself to an attitude of mind wrapped up in the external world; and no objections drawn from the distinctness of species were likely to present themselves. The descent of man from animals or from earth presents no difficulty to primitive thought. It is later, after man has become conscious of his dignity, that he attempts to cut off his poor relations. The god, then, in ancestor-worship is not a god because he is an ancestor, but he is an ancestor because he is a god.

Anthropomorphism.—This connection, so readily accepted, between man and nature, calls for an observation on primitive

Anthropomorphism. It is not strictly true that savage man endows natural objects with a human mind. He does not level up so much as level down. He deifies no attributes of the human intelligence, on the nature of which he has never at all reflected. The truth is rather that he has not become aware of the difference between mind and nature, and so far from exalting other things to his own level, he rather fails to exalt himself above the level of other things. As we have repeatedly insisted, he *is* a self and a mind, but he thinks of himself, or rather sees himself, as a natural object in a world of natural objects,—as one mere thing among others. But it is a beautiful application of the simple yet subtle scheme which I am describing, that it has room for the development of the sense of self within the shell of the objective attitude of mind. The Greek religion, though still objective, *is* truly anthropomorphic. For it deifies idealized individual man in his sensuous perfection,—that is, as beautiful. It is still objective, for its deities are merely natural objects, man in chief, idealized, and yet regarded as a natural object among others, visible and individual; but it is truly anthropomorphic, for it grasps the great qualities of man's heart and intelligence, and in deifying nature—the sky, the lightning, or the sea—ascribes to it these genuinely human attributes.

Consequently, we are here at a turning-point. When man is deified, although as a mere natural individual object, yet in him, implicitly, the mind or self is deified, and when this implication becomes explicit, the worship of a natural object among objects must give way to the worship of a mind or self which is more than one of a crowd of things in space and time. With Socrates, as we know, the new principle, that man is a mind, and so is more than nature, flashed into the Greek consciousness, at first with a destructive effect; and from his day forward the highest form of objective religion had spent its force, and was ready for transformation. The social bond of the Greeks was in that same generation just passing from kinship to the capacity of civilization. "The name of 'Hellene' no longer indicates race, but rather intelligence," said Isocrates, the later contemporary of Socrates.

We can speak more briefly of the two remaining phases of the religious consciousness, not because they are of less importance,—for their importance is infinite—but because they are nearer to ourselves, and also because, by contrast, what has already been said serves largely to explain them. Subjective Religion is the name given to the attitude of man's spirit which deifies a mind, a will, a self, a goodness, and a power, beyond and opposed to the world of separate objects which we call external nature. The great examples are Judaism and Mahometanism, both of which bear on their front their antagonism to idolatry and nature-worship. "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them nor worship them; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God." This is also the command of Mahometanism. And the other or positive side of this worship is the worship of a mind or law higher than the visible world. "Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not; then said I, Lo I come—in the volume of the book it is written of me that I should fulfil thy will, O my God; I am content to do it; yea, thy law is within my heart." Here again, however, within this general outline, we have the whole human mind, struggling with its many-sided tendencies, its love of ritual, its sensuousness, its nature-worship, which we see in the history of Israel. But yet the predominant and characteristic attitude here is that in which external nature is felt to be the mere instrument, the mere footstool of God; the Israelite's feeling for nature is the feeling, not for the beautiful but for the sublime,—for that which suggests the divine by its own effort and infinite shortcoming. "The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedar-trees, yea, the Lord breaketh the cedar-trees of Libanus;" "Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof for a burnt-offering;" "He taketh up the isles as a very little thing." "Before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting and world without end." "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

We know this mood and its greatness. It is the spirit of

the sword of Islam, of the Puritan, and in some sense of the Stoic, as we see him in Horace * or in Campbell; † the mood in which the natural world and the world of art cannot satisfy us,—to which the picture, as John Knox said, is a “pented brod,” the organ a box full of whistles, and the liturgy a mummary, and we yearn for an honest man with a will to do justice and bring righteousness. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” There *is* something, after all, truer and higher than we can see or hear; and whatever nature may be, there is somewhere a God of righteousness.

It is noticeable that the bond of Israel to its God was not the natural tie of blood-relationship; it was the covenant which demanded righteousness, a spiritual bond, and as such capable of extension to mankind. Being Abraham’s seed could give no privilege, if the covenant of righteousness was not kept.

But this faith in a God or self better than nature becomes mere fanaticism or pessimism, as in some forms of the Buddhist faith, if it has no avenue to a deeper truth and reality than the nature-worship which it combated. Kant’s axiom, “I ought, therefore I can,” is overthrown if it is possible to reply, “I cannot, therefore I ought not.” A powerless rejection of the world is a miserable thing, and to reject it rightly can only mean to divine a profounder reality.

Absolute Religion.—Therefore the religious consciousness is forced forward once again, to express itself, if possible, in an adequate form. The unity of man and the world is no longer

* “The just man—unterrified amid a universe crashing to its fall.”

† “Go, sun, while mercy holds me up
On Nature’s awful waste
To drink this last and bitter cup
Of death that man shall taste;
Go tell the Night that hides thy face
Thou sawest the last of Adam’s race
On Earth’s sepulchral clod
The darkening universe defy
To quench his immortality
Or shake his trust in God.”

indicated by the sacredness of a natural object, nor transferred into a mind or will believed in as remote from nature and outside it, if also above it; but it is recognized in its own proper form. For by Absolute or Spiritual Religion it is apprehended as that divinity which progressively reveals itself in the spirit of man and also in the order and beauty of the natural world from which he issues.

It has often been observed that the Founder of Christianity had a disinterested delight in nature, and a true evolutionist's sympathy with its processes. We can hardly ponder too deeply over such a passage as this, "So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep and rise day and night, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself, first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." And so with the growth of the mustard seed, and the operation of the leaven or ferment, which we know, though Jesus did not know, to depend upon the growth of myriad tiny plants. These are the types to which he compares the spiritual world. The kingdom of God, he says, comes naturally, slowly, silently; it *is* in the midst of you; it is something which arising in the spirit of man, has the power to realize an ever increasing unity in the human race by a gentle and gradual growth, like the quiet gracious growths of nature, out of which it develops. Christ himself claims his divinity not apart from his humanity, but in it and because of it. The double nature is a figment of theologians; it is the Son of Man who as such is the Son of God. This, we are well told, has always been the voice of religious devotion, though not of doctrinal theology.

With this declaration of a divinity revealed at once in Nature and in Man the fetters of race and rank fall away, and the social principle comes to depend simply on the degree of man's capacities, as realized at any moment, for participation in a common good. Kinship, on the one hand, is no longer a limit to our sympathies; the covenant, on the other hand, is no longer confined to the chosen people.

And one thing more. The Religion of the Absolute, or

of the recognized Unity between the Self and the World, is not mere Pantheism. If all were equally divine, nothing would be worth worshipping. But the idea of Evolution enables us to understand a progressive revelation. There are degrees of reality, and of divinity, as man more fully apprehends his true humanity and his oneness with the spirit which is in the world. "This long, unhasting, unresting process of the Evolution of Religion is itself the best evidence we can have that there is a divine meaning in the world, and that mankind have not laid the sacrifice of their efforts and their thoughts, their prayers, and their tears, on the altar of an unknown or an unknowable God.*

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LABOR TROUBLES—CAUSES AND PROPOSED REMEDIES.

MR. WRIGHT's article in the January number of this JOURNAL † touches upon some extremely interesting points in the labor problem, which are discussed with his usual wide knowledge of practical questions and with an equally commendable sympathy for those who suffer injustice. But, in spite of these merits in his paper, I think a most important point has been ignored, and it leads to such extended consequences that it deserves some notice.

The general ground upon which Mr. Wright seems to base an advocacy of arbitration as a means of solving the labor problem is the assertion that morality in commercial business has greatly increased, and therefore we can rely upon moral methods in dealing with labor disputes. But the fatal defect in this argument is that it does not distinguish between two radically different kinds of morality,—namely, *subjective* morality, which is good will or action from the sense of duty, virtue for its own sake; and *objective* morality, which is action exter-

* Caird, "Evolution of Religion," conclusion.

† Page 137.